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Preschoolers' social competence may depend on the frequency with which informal play activities are initiated by parents', children, and playmates. In this study, measures of children's peer relations in informal and school contexts and the frequency of parents', children's, and peers' play initiations were obtained with 83 preschool children and their families on 2 occasions. Frequent parent initiations were associated with higher levels of prosocial behavior, lower levels of nonsocial behavior and, among boys, greater peer acceptance in preschool. Children who were more initiating of informal peer contacts displayed less anxious behavior in school and were better liked by their classmates. Finally, the degree to which parents involved children in the process of arranging informal play activities was positively related to the frequency with which children initiated their own peer contacts.

Parents are in a unique position to influence many aspects of their children's social development during the preschool years, including the timing and circumstances under which the children meet and form relationships with peers (Hartup, 1979). Parents may facilitate children's access to peers by choosing to reside in certain neighborhoods, by enrolling children in preschool, and by taking them to community settings, such as the library or pool, where they are likely to meet agemates (see Ladd, LeSieur, & Profilet, in press; Ladd, Profilet, & Hart, in press).

Alternatively, parents may also create informal opportunities for their children to meet and interact with peers by arranging play groups or after-school play activities in their homes, yards, or neighborhoods. Unfortunately, very little is known about the extent to which parents engage in this socialization activity and the potential effects it may have on children's early peer relations and competence.

Findings from several recent studies suggest that parents differ greatly in the frequency with which they arrange informal peer contacts for preschoolers and that mothers are more likely to act as initiators than are fathers (Bhavnagri & Parke, 1991; Ladd & Golter, 1988). There is also evidence to suggest that parents' initiation practices are related to differences in children's social lives and their competence with peers. For example, Ladd, Hart, Wadsworth, and Golter (1988) found that parents who invited children's peers into their homes tended to have children who spent more time playing in peers' homes. In another study, conducted by Ladd and Golter (1988), children of parents who tended to arrange more frequent peer contacts were found to have a larger range of playmates and more consistent play partners in the neighborhood. Moreover, follow-up assessments conducted in kindergarten revealed that boys from these families tended to be better liked and less rejected by their classmates. Similarly, in a study conducted with German school-age children, Krappman (1986) found that children tended to form friendships that were closer, more stable, and less difficult when their parents took an active role in arranging and stimulating their peer relations.

However, parents are not the only persons who sponsor opportunities for children to play informally with peers. During preschool, children begin to initiate their own peer contacts and receive play invitations from peers. In a recent study conducted with 2- through 6-year-olds, Bhavnagri and Parke (1991) asked mothers to estimate how often (frequency per month) they allowed their child's friends or playmates to play in their homes and who was responsible for initiating each contact (i.e., parent, child, or playmate). Results indicated that, compared with younger children, older preschoolers initiated a larger number of their own peer contacts and received a larger number of play overtures from peers.

Thus, the opportunities that preschoolers have to relate with peers in informal play settings and the contributions that these experiences may make to their overall social competence may depend not only on the frequency of their parents' initiations but also on those performed by the child (and others). In view of this, an initial aim of this investigation was to gather additional data on the frequency with which preschoolers' informal play opportunities were initiated by parents, children, and peers. Rather than asking parents to estimate the frequency and sponsorship of children's informal play activities over an extended

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time interval, we asked mothers of younger (approximately 3.5–4.5 years) and older preschoolers (approximately 4.5–5.5 years) to catalog their child's social activities on specific days that were sampled during 3- to 4-week periods at two points in time. Mothers completed a total of 16 telephone logs, 8 per assessment occasion separated by a 6- to 8-week interval. This methodology has been shown to produce reliable data (Ladd & Golter, 1988).

Consistent with the findings reported by Bhavnagri and Parke (1991), we anticipated that the number of peer contacts arranged by parents, preschoolers, and peers would vary with the age of the child. Specifically, younger preschoolers were expected to have more parent- and fewer child- and peer-initiated peer contacts than older preschoolers. Prior evidence did not lead us to expect differences in parents', children's, or peers' initiations for boys versus girls.

We also sought to determine whether parents or children display relatively consistent patterns of initiation over time. To the best of our knowledge, these relations have not been examined in previous research. Therefore, the stability of parent, child, and peer initiations were explored in the present sample.

A second aim was to determine whether certain family circumstances, particularly those that might facilitate or interfere with parents or children's efforts to arrange informal play opportunities, were associated with the frequency of parents' and children's initiations. To address this objective, we asked parents to provide information about (a) the degree to which they valued informal peer contacts for their children, (b) the amount of time children spent in school during each sampled day, (c) family structure (i.e., total number of family members, number of adults present in the home, and number of siblings), (d) employment patterns (i.e., number of hours worked per week by each parent), and (e) demographics (i.e., socioeconomic status [SES] and parents' ages and educational levels).

We anticipated that parents who placed greater value on informal play opportunities would initiate a larger number of these activities for their child. We also reasoned that constraints on parents' time and resources might limit the number of initiations they were willing or able to perform. For example, parents who work long hours may have less time to arrange peer contacts or sponsor play sessions.

Time constraints and family resources may also affect children's opportunities to initiate informal play activities with peers. For example, children who spend many hours per day in child-care settings may limit the amount of time both they and their parents have to arrange after-school play activities with peers. Conversely, in larger families, parents may respond to time pressures by encouraging children to arrange more of their own peer contacts, and children may be more likely to engage in this type of behavior if they have brothers and sisters who model and support it.

A third aim of this investigation was to determine the relative importance of parent and child initiations as predictors of preschoolers' social competence. Specifically, we sought to determine whether the frequency of initiations performed by parents, children, or the combined initiations of both parties predicted preschoolers' peer competence in informal and school settings.

Sponsoring informal play contacts is one of the most direct ways that parents can influence and control their children's early peer experiences. According to the "direct linkage" hypothesis (see Parke & Ladd, in press), parents may initiate peer contacts to help children meet peers, expand playmate networks, maintain existing peer relationships, and develop interpersonal skills.

On the basis of this hypothesis and supporting evidence reported by Ladd and Golter (1988), we anticipated that the frequency of parents' initiations would be associated with the quality of children's peer relations in informal contexts. Parents who initiate frequently may do so to increase the diversity of children's neighborhood playmates or to provide regular opportunities for children to interact with specific peers (e.g., fostering or maintaining specific relationships). Specifically, we expected that parents who initiated frequent peer-play opportunities would tend to have children with larger peer networks and more consistent play companions (i.e., stable relationships).

Previous investigators (e.g., Ladd & Golter, 1988) have also argued that, by facilitating children's informal play opportunities, parents may foster early social competencies that transfer to other peer environments, such as school. If this is the case, then parents who initiate frequently would be expected to have children who are more competent with their peers in preschool (e.g., more sociable and liked among classmates).

Along with parents' efforts to arrange children's peer contacts, it is conceivable that children's initiative in informal peer settings may make an important contribution to the quality of their playmate networks and competence with peers in school. Specifically, we anticipated that children who demonstrated higher levels of initiation would tend to have larger playmate networks and a greater number of consistent play companions. Positive relations were also expected between the frequency of children's play initiations and their social competence in preschool settings.

Finally, if a relation emerges between children's efforts to sponsor their own play activities and the quality of their informal and classroom peer relations, then it will be important to understand how children develop this skill. On the one hand, it is possible that variation in children's peer initiations are attributable to underlying differences in their temperament or sociability. On the other hand, these differences may also be attributable to socialization influences, particularly the degree to which parents support their children's efforts to meet and interact with peers in informal settings.

We chose, as the final aim of this investigation, to explore the latter proposition. Along with the frequency of parents' initiations, we also gathered data on the strategies parents used to initiate children's peer contacts, and we examined the degree to which each of these variables predicted the frequency with which children initiated their own peer contacts. Two types of strategies were identified as possible avenues through which parents encourage children to take initiative and responsibility for their own peer contacts. First, parents who arrange informal peer activities may socialize children's initiation skills by involving them in the initiation process (e.g., engaging children in the process of contacting peers and extending play invitations). Second, parents may also foster this type of initiative by involving children in the process of planning play dates (e.g., choosing times, locations, activities, and playmates). Measures of these

strategies, along with the frequency of parents' initiations, were used to predict the number of times children initiated their own peer contacts.

Method

Sample and Timeline

The sample for this study consisted of 83 middle-class preschool children (35 boys and 48 girls) and their parents who resided in a moderate-sized southern community. All of the children were between 3.5 and 5.6 years of age (42 to 67 months) at the outset of the study, and there were 15 boys and 26 girls between the ages of 3.5 and 4.5 and 20 boys and 22 girls between the ages of 4.6 and 5.6. All of the participating children were enrolled in one of four center-based preschool programs. Consent was obtained from 74% of the families who were invited to participate and, of these families, 83% had two parents living in the home, 9% were single parents, 6% were stepfamilies, and 2% were other types of families. Assessments were conducted during the early winter (interval = 20–25 days; M = 22.5) and late spring (interval = 24–32 days; M = 26.4) months of the school year and were separated by a 6- to 8-week interval.

Instruments and Measures

Parent telephone logs. A telephone interview procedure adapted from Ladd and Golter (1988) was used to assemble a log of parents' initiation practices and children's nonschool peer contacts for 8 days (5 weekdays and 3 weekend days) during each assessment period (16 days total). Each interview was conducted by one of six trained female interviewers (undergraduate and graduate students) and was scheduled during evening hours, after the child's bedtime, on days that parents considered to be typical of their child's peer activities (interviews that occurred on days the parent deemed "atypical" were rescheduled). In two-parent families, the parent who was most familiar with the child's peer activities was asked to report about the activities of both parents (83% of those interviewed were mothers).

All interviews were conducted with a standardized interview and recording protocol (available from Gary W. Ladd), and parents were trained to report relevant aspects of their own behavior and their child's social activities during the first interview. Subsequent interviews lasted approximately 20 min, and during this time parents were asked to divide the day into three specific time periods (i.e., morning, afternoon, and evening) and, for each of these periods, provide an hour-by-hour account of their child's nonschool social activities, including contacts with peers. The number of hours children spent in school or child-care settings were also delineated and recorded. A peer contact was defined as an activity or series of activities continuously performed by the child with one or more peers in an informal, nonschool setting (e.g., child's home, peer's home, or neighborhood). For recording purposes, the beginning and end of a contact was defined by cessation of play or by changes in play partners (e.g., a new peer joins the activity).

Interviewers documented the duration of each reported contact (in minutes), the location of the contact (e.g., child's house), and a description of the participating peer or peers (e.g., name, sex, and age). Data from these sources were summed across the 16 interview occasions and were used to create the following measures of children's informal peer relations (cf. Ladd & Golter, 1988): *contact frequency* (i.e., number of reported peer contacts), *range of partners* (i.e., number of different playmates), and *frequent play companions* (i.e., number of playmates present in 25% or more of the subject's contacts). An estimate of *time spent in school* was created by summing the number of hours and minutes obtained for this measure over the 16 days.

For each reported contact, three questions were used to ascertain (a) who had initiated the contact (i.e., "Who first had the idea for the children to get together for this contact?") and, for those contacts initiated by the parent, (b) the degree to which the parent involved the child in initiating the contact (i.e., "How did you initiate this play contact?") and (c) the degree to which the parent involved the child in planning the contact (i.e., "Were any plans made in advance about what the children would do?").

Interviewers recorded parents responses verbatim and, for Question a, designated a *primary initiator* from a list of potential sponsors (e.g., parent, child, peer playmate, and other). These data were used to calculate the *frequency of peer contacts* that had been initiated by each type of sponsor. For each of Questions b–d, the interviewers also asked a standard set of yes–no probe questions (e.g., "Did you ask your child to call the playmate?" and "Did you call and invite the playmate, and then tell your child?") that were designed to shed light on the degree to which the parent had involved the child in the initiation and planning process. Once the information for each question was complete, the interviewers rated the parent on the corresponding dimension using a 5-point scale, with 1 = *low* and 5 = *high.* Ratings were then averaged over all parent-sponsored initiations to produce two scores: *scaffolding* (i.e., degree to which parent involved the child in the process of initiating the contact) and *planning* (i.e., degree to which the child assisted the parent with planning or preparations for the contact).

All of the interviews were audiotaped, and 17.2% were scored by two independent coders. Cohen's kappa was calculated to estimate agreement between the coders for several telephone log measures (for quantitative and rating measures, scale points were treated as categories so that exact agreement could be assessed). The following kappa values were obtained: contact frequency, 1.00; primary initiator, .84; scaffolding, .93; and planning, .95.

Parent questionnaires. A family information questionnaire was distributed by the staff members at the participating preschools at the beginning of each assessment occasion and, on each occasion, 100% of the families completed and returned their questionnaires within a 3-week period. We used the questions on this instrument to create the following measures: (a) parents' perceptions of the importance of informal (nonschool) peer contacts for their child (i.e., ratings on a 5-point importance scale); (b) family structure (i.e., one of three family-type categories: two-parent, single-parent, or other; and family size: number of children currently living at home); (c) parents' employment (i.e., number of hours regularly worked per week by mothers and/or fathers); and (d) family demographics (i.e., parents' income, occupation, ages, and number of years of schooling completed). The final measures were also used to create a measure of socioeconomic status (Hollingshead Four-Factor Index; see Gottfried, 1985). Because mothers completed most of the phone interviews and arranged most of the sampled peer contacts (cf. Bhavnagri & Parke, 1991; Ladd & Golter, 1988), their responses to the questionnaire items were used in subsequent analyses.

Observations of children's behavior at preschool. Five observers used a scan-sampling scheme (see Ladd, 1983; Ladd & Golter, 1988) to gather data on children's behaviors at school. Each child was observed for a total of 90 scans during free-play periods that were scheduled on preschool playgrounds at regular intervals throughout the mid-winter and spring months of the investigation. Children were observed in a predetermined random order and, for each scan, observers focused on the child's behavior and coded it into 1 of 10 mutually exclusive categories, including (a) social conversation (i.e., face-to-face talk); (b) cooperative play (i.e., nondisruptive mutual activity with peers); (c) argue (i.e., hostile talk); (d) rough play (i.e., boisterous, quasi-agonistic activity); (e) aggression (i.e., hostile acts); (f) parallel play (i.e., play near but not with others); (g) solitary-constructive play (i.e., alone but occupied with a nondisruptive task); (h) onlooking (i.e., watching but not interacting); (i) unoccupied (i.e., alone and aimless or off-task); (j) transition (i.e.,

Table 1
Average Number of Informal Peer-Play Opportunities Initiated by Parents, Children, and Peers

Sponsor	Age		Gender		Full sample
	Younger	Older	Male	Female	
Parents					
M	2.68	2.25	2.69	2.31	2.47
SD	2.18	1.46	1.45	2.09	1.85
Children					
M	1.89	2.61	2.56	2.04	2.26
SD	1.84	2.56	2.66	1.90	2.20
Peers					
M	1.61	2.08	1.81	1.87	1.84
SD	1.66	2.07	1.89	1.91	1.89
Total contacts					
M	8.50	10.28	10.50	8.62	9.40
SD	4.34	5.61	5.95	4.23	5.06

alone and traveling from one activity to another); and (k) teacher (i.e., interacting with teacher). Behaviors that did not fit any of these categories were coded as "other."

Observers also used five additional codes to document children's anxious behaviors (see Ladd, 1990; Ladd & Price, 1987; Rubin, 1984), including (a) immobile (i.e., rigid, displays no movement); (b) rocking (i.e., back-and-forth rocking motion in either a standing or sitting position); (c) shuffling (i.e., repetitive foot movements while standing); (d) sucking (i.e., fingers in mouth); and (e) automanipulation (i.e., excessive, repetitive manipulation of hair or body parts).

Before data collection, each observer practiced with a judge until he or she achieved better than 80% agreement on each behavioral code. During data collection, observers conducted 15% to 20% of their observations on a scan-by-scan basis with a reliability judge. Cohen's kappa was calculated to estimate agreement between each observer and the judge and, across all pairs, the coefficients ranged from .79 to .88 (M = .84) for the entire scheme. Because of low frequencies, the five anxiety codes were summed and treated as a single category within the observational scheme. Percentage of agreement by category averaged .86.

Scores for the amount of time sampled that children spent in each behavior were created by summing the number of observations coded in each category. Substantial correlations were found between some of the behaviors coded in these categories. On the basis of these findings, the following composites were created by summing the scores contained in related behavioral categories: *prosocial behavior* (social conversation + cooperative play), *antisocial behavior* (argue + aggression), *unconstructive nonsocial behavior* (onlooking + unoccupied + transition), and *anxious behavior* (sum of anxiety codes).

Children's classroom peer status. We used a sociometric rating and nomination procedure, developed by Asher, Singleton, Tinsley, and Hymel (1979), to assess children's peer status among classmates at each time of measurement. Children were initially trained to sort familiar objects (i.e., foods) according to preference and were then presented with a felt board containing randomly ordered photographs of classmates. We obtained nominations by asking children to point to the pictures of three liked and three disliked classmates; we obtained ratings by asking children to sort all of the pictures into one of three boxes according to whether they liked to play with the person "a lot," "kinda," or "not much." Pictures of facial expressions (happy, neutral, and frown) were used to represent each scale point.

We created measures of peer liking and disliking by summing the number of positive and negative nominations received, respectively, from classmates. These scores were then standardized by classrooms and were used to create a measure of *social preference* (i.e., Z positive minus Z negative nominations).

Results

Frequency of Parent, Child, and Peer Initiations

In addition to using the contact frequency measure (i.e., total number of peer contacts reported), we calculated three separate scores for each child by summing the number of peer contacts initiated by parents, children, and peers across the 16 sampled days. These scores are reported for the entire sample and by sex and age of child in Table 1.

Consistent with the initial aim of our investigation, analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were used to determine whether initiation frequencies differed by sponsor (e.g., parents, children, or peers) and by age and gender of child within each type of sponsor. The stability of the three initiation measures and the relations among them were examined with correlational analyses.

Differences in initiations by sponsor and by age and gender of child. A one-factor repeated measures ANOVA revealed that the number of contacts initiated by parents, children, and peers did not differ significantly, $F(2, 152) = 2.14$, *ns.* Differences attributable to children's age and gender were examined in a 2 (age: younger, older) × 2 (gender: male, female) multivariate analysis of variance in which scores for the total number of contacts and the number of initiations performed by parents, children, and peers served as variates. This analysis also produced nonsignificant findings, although the univariate test performed on the contact frequency measure revealed a trend for parents to report more peer contacts for older as compared with younger preschoolers, $F(1, 73) = 2.65$, $p < .10$.

Stability of the initiation measures. We examined stability by correlating the frequency of initiations performed by parents, children, and peers across the two assessment occasions (separate 6- to 8-week intervals). The resulting stability coefficients (see Table 2) suggest that there is, at best, only moderate consistency in parents', children's, or peers' initiation frequencies. The initiation frequencies observed for children were among the most stable, and parents' initiations tended to be more stable with younger as opposed to older preschoolers.

Table 2
Stability and Intercorrelation of the Parent, Child, and Peer Initiation Measures

Measure	Age		Gender		Full sample
	Younger	Older	Male	Female	
Stabilities					
Parents	.30*	.09	.22	.21	.21
Children	.27*	.37*	.38**	.28*	.34***
Peers	.21	.31*	.23	.33**	.28**
Intercorrelations					
Parents–children	.03	.09	.28*	−.15	.04
Children–peers	.26†	.17	.27†	.18	.22*

† $p < .07$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Family and Demographic Concomitants of Parents' and Children's Initiations

Descriptive statistics for the demographic measures were as follows: proportion of two-parent families, 89%; number of siblings, 0–4, $M = 2.21$; number of hours worked by mothers, 0–50, $M = 18.44$; number of hours worked by fathers, 16–80, $M = 44.77$; income, 6-interval scale, with 1 = under $7,000 and 6 = over $50,000, $M = 4.88$; mother's age in years, 22–44, $M = 33.91$; father's age in years, 26–51, $M = 35.90$; mother's years in school, 12–22, $M = 16.10$; father's years in school, 10–24, $M = 17.36$; Hollingshead SES, 32–66, $M = 56.46$ (see Gottfried, 1985); and time spent in child care over 16 sampled days, 2.67–123.6, $M = 36.94$.

Correlational analyses were used to determine whether differences in family circumstances were related (concurrently) to the frequency with which parents and children arranged informal play contacts with peers. Specifically, scores for the frequency of parents' and children's initiations were correlated with the measures of (a) parents' perceptions of the importance of informal peer contacts for children (ratings), (b) amount of time sampled that children spent in child care or preschool (in hours and minutes), (c) family structure (e.g., number of children, older siblings, and adults present in the home), (d) parental employment (i.e., average number of hours worked per week by each parent), and (e) family demographics (i.e., scores for Hollingshead SES index [see Gottfried, 1985], income, and parents' ages and years of education).

Only two of the correlations produced by these analyses achieved significance, and these coefficients were obtained between the measures of parents' importance ratings and the frequency of their initiations, $r = .27$, $p < .05$, and the number of siblings living in the family and the frequency of children's initiations, $r = .28$, $p < .01$. Additional analyses revealed that the measures of SES and number of older siblings were correlated with children's overall contact frequency scores ($r = .27$, $p < .05$, and $r = .21$, $p < .05$, respectively), but not with the number of contacts initiated by parents or children.

Linkages Between the Frequency of Parents' and Children's Initiations and the Quality of Children's Peer Relations

We conducted a series of hierarchical regression analyses to examine the relative importance of parent and child initiations as predictors of children's peer relations and competence in informal and school settings. The criteria used in these analyses included two measures of children's informal peer relations (i.e., range of partners and number of frequent play companions) and five measures of their social competence in preschool (i.e., prosocial, antisocial, nonsocial, and anxiety behaviors as well as social preference). Correlations among the criteria were small in magnitude ($r = -.29$ to .10), with the exception of prosocial and antisocial behavior, which were moderately correlated ($r = -.50$). All measures were retained for further analyses.

Each of these criteria were regressed on the following predictors: child's school time, child's gender, child's age, number of parent initiations, number of child initiations, and designated interaction terms. Correlational analyses revealed little or no multicollinearity among the predictors ($r = -.14$ to .18).

The order of entry of the predictors was the same as specified earlier. Scores for time in school, gender, and age were entered first to examine the contribution of these factors and to control for their effects on subsequent predictors. Parent and child initiation scores were entered next, followed by variables representing interactions between child attributes (i.e., gender and age) and either parent or child initiation frequencies (e.g., gender by frequency of parent initiations). To prevent the number of predictors from exceeding the limits imposed by our sample size, we alternately entered each interaction term on the final step of the analysis (see Cohen & Cohen, 1983).

The resulting R^2 values and tests on individual predictors are reported in Table 3. To aid interpretation, bivariate correlations between individual predictors and criteria are reported in Table 4.

Informal peer relations. As can be seen in Table 3, the regression performed on the range of partner scores achieved significance, and four of the investigated predictors accounted for a significant proportion of the variance in this criterion. These findings revealed that the range of children's play partners tended to be larger among boys and older preschoolers, as well as in families in which parents or children frequently initiated informal contacts with peers. The results obtained for the frequent play companions measure were nonsignificant, although the relation between this criterion and the frequency of parents' initiations was positive and approached significance.

Preschool playground and classroom peer competence. The overall regression equations for each of the measures of observed playground behavior were significant. In the analysis performed on prosocial behavior, children's age, the frequency of parents' initiations, and the interaction of these two factors emerged as significant predictors. Although both age and parent's initiation frequency were positively associated with prosocial behavior, the relation between parents' initiations and children's prosocial behavior was stronger among younger ($r = .39$) than older ($r = .06$) preschoolers.

Children's gender and the frequency of parents' initiations accounted for significant proportions of the variance in observed nonsocial behaviors. Boys, as well as children whose parents were frequent initiators, tended to spend less time in unconstructive nonsocial behaviors on the playground.

Antisocial behavior was predicted by the amount of time children spent in preschool and by gender. Children who spent more time in school and male preschoolers tended to have higher scores for antisocial behavior.

Age and the frequency of children's initiations made significant contributions to the prediction of anxious behavior. Older preschoolers and children who performed a larger number of initiations tended to display lower levels of anxious behavior on the playground. Moreover, these findings were qualified by a significant interaction between children's age and their initiation frequency, indicating that the relation between the frequency of children's initiations and anxious behavior was somewhat stronger among younger preschoolers ($r = -.34$) than among older preschoolers ($r = -.21$).

The regression of children's social preference scores on the

Table 3
Results of Regression Analyses Performed on Measures of Children's Informal Peer Relations and Classroom Social Competence

Measure	Time in school	G	A	Initiation frequency P	Initiation frequency C	Interaction P × A	Interaction P × G	Interaction C × A
Informal								
Range								
R^2	.01	.07	.13	.21	.26*			
R_{inc}	.01	.06*	.06*	.08*	.05*			
Frequent companions								
R^2	.02	.02	.05	.09	.09			
R_{inc}	.02	.00	.03	.04†	.00			
Classroom								
Prosocial								
R^2	.02	.03	.09	.15	.16	.21*		
R_{inc}	.02	.01	.06*	.06*	.01	.05*		
Nonsocial								
R^2	.00	.11	.14	.20	.21*			
R_{inc}	.00	.11**	.03	.06*	.01			
Antisocial								
R^2	.08	.26	.26	.27	.28**			
R_{inc}	.08*	.18**	.00	.01	.01			
Anxious								
R^2	.00	.00	.07	.00	.12			.18*
R_{inc}	.00	.00	.07*	.00	.05*			.06*
Social preference								
R^2	.00	.00	.00	.01	.07		.15	
R_{inc}	.00	.00	.00	.01	.06*		.08*	

Note. G = gender; A = age; P = parent; C = child. R_{inc} = increment to R^2.
† $p < .07$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

targeted predictors approached ($p < .10$) but did not achieve statistical significance. However, it is interesting to observe that two predictors—the frequency of children's initiations and the Gender × Parent Initiation interaction—accounted for statistically significant proportions of the explained variance. Children who performed frequent peer initiations tended to have higher levels of peer acceptance among their classmates. In addition, the relation between frequent parent initiations and children's peer acceptance was stronger for boys ($r = .30$) than for girls ($r = -.15$).

Are Parents' Initiation Strategies Related to the Frequency of Children's Initiations?

For the sample as a whole, little relation was found between the frequency of parents' and children's initiations (see Table 2). However, when examined by gender, the correlation obtained for boys was positive and significant, whereas the one obtained for girls was negative and nonsignificant. A small but positive relation was also found between the number of initiations performed by children and peers.

Table 4
Correlations Between Predictors and Criteria

Measure	Time in school	Gender	Age	Frequency of initiations: Parent	Frequency of initiations: Child
Informal					
Range	−.11	−.24*	.25**	.28**	.29**
Frequent companions	.14	.01	.18	.16†	.10
Classroom					
Prosocial	.15	.09	.23*	.22*	.02
Nonsocial	−.05	.33***	−.26**	−.26**	−.07
Antisocial	.29**	−.44***	.14	.01	−.05
Anxious	.01	.06	−.26**	.02	−.27**
Social preference	.04	.02	.02	−.12	.23*

† $p < .07$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .0019$.

Further analyses were conducted to determine whether the quantity or the quality of parents' initiation strategies bore a stronger relation to the frequency of children's initiations. However, because the scaffolding and planning scores were obtained only when parents acted as initiators, this analysis was limited to those parents who had initiated one or more peer contacts across the days sampled ($n = 67$). A hierarchical regression analysis was performed in which the frequency of children's initiations were regressed on the following predictors: child's school time, gender, age, number of parent initiations, parent scaffolding, and parent planning. These predictors were only moderately correlated (r ranged from .36 to −.29) and were entered in the order listed. Interaction terms were entered on the final step of the analysis.

The overall proportion of variance accounted for in children's initiation frequencies was significant, $R^2 = .37$, $F(6, 60) = 5.98$, $p < .001$, as was the increment (R^2 change = .27) provided by the scaffolding measure, $F(5, 61) = 27.29$, $p < .001$. With the exception of age, which was positively correlated with the criterion ($r = .27$) and was marginally significant, $F(3, 63) = 3.76$, $p < .06$, the remaining predictors and interaction terms failed to account for significant proportions of the variance.

Discussion

In our attempts to delineate the direct linkage hypothesis (see Ladd, LeSieur, & Profilet, in press; Ladd, Profilet, & Hart, in press), we have argued that it is important to understand both the antecedents of parents' management behaviors (i.e., factors that may motivate parents to arrange informal peer contacts) and the effects of parents' managerial activities on children's social competence. The results of this investigation begin to shed light on both of these pathways.

As a means of exploring the first pathway, we hypothesized that both family circumstances (e.g., parents' work hours, children's child-care schedules, and family size) and parents' perceptions (e.g., beliefs about the value of informal peer contacts) would be related to the frequency with which parents initiated informal peer contacts for their child. Contrary to our predictions, we did not find that the frequency of parents' initiations was related to factors such as parents' employment schedules, children's involvement in child care, or family demographics. Although this evidence would seem to negate the hypothesis that these family circumstances operate as constraints on children's informal peer relations, such a conclusion is probably premature. We say this because the majority of participants in this sample were two-parent families from lower- to upper-middle-class backgrounds, and research done with more extreme samples (e.g., single-parent or low-income families) may produce different results. For example, parents in lower SES or economically deprived families may initiate less often because they lack adequate play locations or materials (e.g., live in dangerous neighborhoods; see Cochran & Davila, in press; Cochran & Riley, 1988), or have less flexibility to arrange peer contacts (e.g., ability to transport children; see Ladd et al., 1988).

However, of the antecedents investigated here, two appear to merit further investigation. First, we found that parents who placed greater value on informal peer-play activities also tended to initiate more of these experiences for their children. The fact that parents' values correlated with the frequency of their own initiations and not those performed by the child (or total peer contacts) lends support to a parent-effects interpretation of these data. For example, parents' values may motivate differential socialization practices—in this case, the number of opportunities they create for children to relate with peers in informal settings.

Second, we found that children who came from larger families (more sibling relationships) tended to initiate more frequent peer-play activities. In this case, a family-effects interpretation would seem to be most plausible, including the possibility that parents in larger families encourage children to take more initiative and responsibility for their peer contacts. Also, siblings may aid children in arranging play activities (a possibility not examined in this study), or children may meet playmates through siblings and, thus, develop a larger number of companions with whom they can initiate social activities.

These data also further our understanding of the pathway between parental management and children's social competence. Although we construe "direct" parental influences as encompassing multiple managerial roles (e.g., parent as designer, mediator, supervisor, and consultant—see Ladd, LeSieur, & Profilet, in press; Ladd, Profilet, & Hart, in press), these data have been gathered to probe the relation between parental mediation—specifically, the frequency with which parents arrange informal peer contacts for their children—and children's competence with peers in informal and school settings.

When viewed from a parent-effects perspective, our data suggest that parents' initiations may be associated with several aspects of child competence. Specifically, the following "parent mediation" models appear to be consistent with our findings.

1. *Facilitation of interactional skills:* By arranging frequent peer contacts, parents provide an interactional context that promotes both sociability (i.e., lower levels of nonsocial behavior) and prosocial behaviors with peers. For example, our anecdotal data suggest that when parents initiate informal play activities in their homes, they often place children in the role of "host." In this role, children are expected to be concerned about the needs and wishes of their playmates and ensure that their guests "have a good time." In fact, recent evidence gathered by Ross, Tesla, Kenyon, and Lollis (1990) suggests that when parents do intervene in children's home-based peer activities (e.g., object conflicts), it is often to urge children to yield to the rights of playmates and to promote the use of prosocial behaviors. Children who develop these skills are able to build larger informal peer networks and, especially among boys, these competencies lead to higher levels of acceptance by classmates.

2. *Relationship management and enhancement:* Parents sponsor frequent play opportunities as a means of ensuring that their children will have regular contact with certain playmates (e.g., foster friendships) or develop diverse or extensive peer networks (e.g., relate with a variety of playmates). By participating in these relational contexts, children develop prosocial behaviors and become more sociable (less nonsocial) with peers (see Howes, 1983, 1988). Because extensive social ties appear to be normative among boys (Ladd, 1983; Ladd, Price, & Hart, 1990; Waldrop & Halverson, 1975), boys whose parents foster diverse

peer networks may be better able to negotiate multiple peer relationships and group activities in school and, thus, achieve higher levels of peer acceptance (cf. Ladd & Golter, 1988).

3. *Socialization of initiation:* In this model, the frequency of parents' initiations is less important than the degree to which they involve children in the initiation process. That is, parents foster children's ability to initiate their own play contacts by encouraging them to perform many of the skills that are required to arrange and negotiate play dates with peers. In this study, parents with high scaffolding scores tended to ask children to assist with tasks such as thinking about who would be fun to play with, calling and asking the peer to play, telling the peer about "fun" things they could do together, and finding out when the peer could come over to play. Through this process, parents encourage the child to take responsibility for peer activities and relationships and, as a result, children are better prepared to initiate and manage their own peer relationships in both informal and classroom contexts. In addition to building larger informal networks and being more successful with schoolmates (e.g., developing higher levels of peer acceptance), children who are assertive enough to cultivate their own peer relations may feel less distressed by the interpersonal demands they encounter in classrooms (e.g., display lower levels of anxiety).

Alternatively, models that presume the opposite direction of effect or a child-effects perspective are also tenable. For example, highly sociable children may not only form larger informal networks and excel at classroom peer relations but also elicit higher levels of parental involvement in various socialization activities (e.g., initiating play activities). Moreover, differences in the frequency with which children initiate their own informal play contacts may reflect variation in preschoolers' social motivation and maturity. Children who frequently ask to play with peers or who arrange play activities on their own may be more interested in peers and better able to manage peer relationships independently of their parents. These same factors may be responsible for the achievements these children display in their informal and preschool peer relations.

The strength of potential child-effect interpretations appear to be diminished, however, by the types of age effects obtained with this sample. For example, the frequency with which parents arranged play contacts was more stable with younger as opposed to older preschoolers. Such a pattern may occur because parents' sponsorship of peer contacts is more deliberate and concerted with younger preschoolers and more intermittent or sporadic with older preschoolers. Moreover, conventional wisdom tells us that, within a few years, parents will transfer most if not all of the responsibility for arranging peer activities to the child. Thus, the preschool years may be the only developmental period in which parents attempt to arrange children's peer contacts or share this responsibility with the child. Also consistent with this pattern was the finding that the relation between parent initiation and prosocial behavior varied with age. Here again, the most parsimonious interpretation seems to be that younger children were more influenced by their parents' initiations than were older children.

Other descriptive aims were also pursued in this investigation. One such goal was to expand our understanding of the frequency and source of children's informal peer-play activities during the mid- to late-preschool years. With few exceptions (e.g., Bhavnagri & Parke, 1991), researchers have focused on parents' contributions to this aspect of children's social lives, without considering other potential participants, such as children and peers. Our interview methodology and sampling technique provided a more comprehensive and systematic accounting of both the frequency and sponsorship of children's peer-play opportunities than has been used in previous studies.

Our data show that, in most of the families included in this sample (81%), parents arranged one or more peer contacts during the course of the investigation. However, the frequency with which parents engaged in this behavior differed substantially across families, as did the number of initiations performed by children and peers.

A breakdown of children's informal peer contacts by initiator revealed that, although parents are an important source for this type of social activity, they share this role with both children and peers. In fact, for the age groups investigated here, we found that children and peers were as active as parents in instigating informal play opportunities.

Contrary to expectations, the number of initiations performed by parents, children, or peers did not differ significantly for younger and older preschoolers (although the obtained means were in the expected direction). One explanation for the discrepancy between our findings and those reported by Bhavnagri and Parke (1991) is that the age groups in the Bhavnagri and Parke study were more disparate than those in our sample. Whereas Bhavnagri and Parke compared 2–3-year-olds with 3–5-year-olds, we compared 3–4-year-olds with 4–5-year-olds. Thus, most of the children in our sample fell within Bhavnagri and Parke's older age group. The fact that significant age differences were absent in this study may mean that, on average, the frequency with which parents, children, and peers initiate informal peer contacts does not change substantially during the mid- to late-preschool years.

In conclusion, further research is needed to extend our knowledge about how parents manage children's informal peer relations and how this type of socialization activity interacts with various child characteristics to produce higher or lower levels of social competence. Although some parents appear to take an active role in socializing children's initiation skills, we still know very little about this process, the motivations that may underlie it, and the pathways through which it may influence later child competence.

Also, longitudinal studies are needed to determine the age at which parents begin to initiate peer contacts for children and when during development they begin to transfer this responsibility to the child. It seems possible to us that the potential impact of parents' initiations may peak during the middle preschool years and decline as children grow older. Beyond this, the role that family circumstances play in parents' and children's efforts to arrange informal play activities should be reexamined with diverse samples.

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